

The Annual Physical Therapy Visit: Opportunities for Service Learning in Professional Education

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ABSTRACT

The American Physical Therapy Association promotes the Annual Physical Therapy Visit. Similar to an older adult who may see his/her medical provider annually, it is recommended that the aging adult see a physical therapist who will perform screening tests for strength, endurance, flexibility, balance, and gait. Early detection of physical decline in aging may result in referral for physical therapy, wellness programming, or medical care. Community members and students experience mutual benefits.

Keywords: community engagement, prevention, rehabilitation, screening

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) recommends that individuals see a physical therapist annually to promote healthy aging and avoid unnecessary physical impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions (APTA, 2018). The organization provides recommendations and resources for physical therapists to encourage further participation in this clinical activity (APTA, n.d.). The Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) Program at Indiana State University (ISU) offered the Annual Physical Therapy Visit (APTV) in the spring of 2017, 2018, and 2019 as a free, pro bono service to the public targeting older adults in an underserved area of Indiana. No screens were performed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is written as a case study to explain the process of administering the APTV as a service-learning project, which is believed to be underutilized in physical therapy education.

The APTV at ISU is popular amid local senior citizens, with many returning each year. Satisfaction survey results are positive

among participants, and student reflections indicate a strong appreciation for the experience. This specific DPT service-learning project appears to be somewhat unique in DPT professional education; therefore, the decision was made to describe the process in detail so other programs can become aware of this opportunity. This paper outlines the procedure for delivering the APTV as a service-learning assignment in DPT professional education and includes recommendations and lessons learned from three separate DPT cohorts. The project may generate ideas for service-learning projects for other healthcare professional programs, including medicine, athletic training, nursing, physician assistants, and occupational therapy, that may have the potential to offer similar services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Physical Therapy and Service Learning

Service learning is employed frequently in many academic disciplines, including

medical and nursing sciences, business and economics, computer science and information systems, social studies, teacher education, linguistics, and environmental disciplines (Salam et al., 2019). Service learning is a form of experiential learning that addresses academic objectives in conjunction with meaningful community service (Cashman & Seifer, 2008). Educational benefits of service learning include developing hands-on skills, applying theories to practice in the community, and fostering a sense of social responsibility (Azer et al., 2013). Service learning is distinct from other forms of experiential learning in health professional education, like clinical internships, by aiming to increase students' sense of social responsibility while applying knowledge and skills learned during academic coursework. Clinical internships tend to focus on the development of the student, with learning experiences structured around the application and development of clinical skills. Service learning in physical therapy provides the student with an opportunity for practical, hands-on experiences with community members in need of services.

McMenamin et al. (2014) described six domains for outcomes of service learning: (i) personal and interpersonal development; (ii) understanding and applying knowledge; (iii) engagement, curiosity, and reflective practice; (iv) critical thinking; (v) perspective transformation; and (vi) citizenship. Objectives to promote critical inquiry and reflective practice are consistent across healthcare education, and service learning can provide an opportunity to achieve these key learning objectives (Azer et al., 2013). Instructor guidance throughout the process allows students to be involved in the development, planning, and execution of a service event. Prompts after the event assist in promoting reflection, personal growth, and perspective transformation regarding the profession's role in society.

The domains for service learning outcomes align with APTA Core Values of altru-

ism, social responsibility, caring, and compassion. Social responsibility is defined as "the promotion of a mutual trust between the profession and the larger public that necessitates responding to societal needs for health and wellness" (APTA, 2019b, p. 2) and connects well with the "giving back" component of service learning. Enhanced appreciation of the APTA Core Values has been cited previously as a benefit of community-based service learning in physical therapy education (Gazsi & Oriel, 2010). Compassion/caring and accountability have been reported as the most common APTA Core Values experienced by students during service-learning activities (Crandell, Wiegand, & Brosky, 2013). In addition to the Core Values, the APTA Code of Ethics guides physical therapy professional education and practice. In this document, principle #8 states, "Physical therapists shall participate in efforts to meet the health needs of people locally, nationally, or globally" (APTA, 2020, p. 3). This provides an ethical imperative for social responsibility that service-learning activities can meet.

Reynolds (2005) highlighted the distinct benefits of service-learning experiences compared to clinical internship experiences for physical therapy students. Clinical internships are typically individual student learning experiences in a clinical setting under the supervision of a single clinical instructor as compared to service learning, which usually involves group projects that occur outside of a formal clinical setting. The benefits of service learning include the chance to participate in prevention and wellness screening, the development of an increased appreciation for cultural differences within community members, and an increased sense of social responsibility. Many clinical internship experiences offer limited opportunity to provide consultation, prevention, and wellness, or to demonstrate social commitment and advocacy.

Community service-learning projects allow students active involvement in planning and implementing stages, thereby fostering

organizational and leadership skills. Some authors have proposed service learning as an ideal learning approach for physical therapy students due to its ability to develop leadership skills, foster team-building skills, and build a deeper understanding of professional roles (Hoppes et al., 2005). The development of leadership skills in the personal and interpersonal domains along with promoting citizenship fit with previous descriptions of the domains of service learning (McMenamin et al., 2014).

Nordon-Craft et al. (2017) explored the benefits of actively involving students in designing and implementing a service-learning project to reduce falls. Students self-reported reduced anxiety and improved confidence when working with older adults after participating in the project. This included an increase in self-reported ability to interpret clinical findings from assessments. The students also had a greater appreciation for the importance of social responsibility and an increased interest in working with older adults. These benefits highlight service learning's ability to enhance social responsibility, professionalism, and the application of hands-on knowledge and skills learned during academic coursework.

Annual Screenings

The APTV is a type of annual health screen. Annual health screens are a form of secondary prevention strategy to ensure pathologies are identified at early stages with the goal of less morbidity and mortality (Morabia, 2004). Unfortunately, the current healthcare model is primarily focused on tertiary management and care. Similarly, current healthcare curriculums focus on educating our future providers to manage disease rather than prevent disease. As the healthcare model evolves, preventative practice is more valued by patients and practitioners (CDC, n.d.). The APTA acknowledges that physical therapists have the knowledge and expertise to provide an adequate health screen that allows for the visibility of individuals' status of health over time and the potential to capture early

signs of disease that warrant referral (APTA, 2021b). Perhaps the most supportive data for annual screening by physical therapists is identifying patients at risk for falls. Falls become more common with advancing age and are estimated to cost \$30 billion annually in direct medical costs in the United States (Phelan et al., 2015). Phelan et al. (2015) also suggest that current statistics indicate that approximately 30% to 40% of people aged 65 years and older will fall annually. The opportunity provided by the APTV offers a chance to address this critical public health concern in high-risk populations.

METHODOLOGY

Project Description

In the spring semester, second year DPT students in a cohort of approximately 30 are required to complete PHTH 720, Health Promotion and Wellness, a one credit hour course that is a blend of didactic training and service-learning assignments. One course objective is to "implement health promotion and wellness programs based on cost effectiveness and available resources" (Tapley, 2019, p. 1). The APTV is an assignment that includes completion of the service-learning project, a written paper (30% of course grade), and a presentation (15% of course grade). Students plan, implement, and evaluate the event under the supervision of faculty who are licensed physical therapists. Adults aged 50 and older, who are community members in the Terre Haute, Indiana, area are offered free screenings that include an assessment of strength, flexibility, endurance, balance, and gait. Clients are recruited through local organizations such as senior centers, churches, etc. When deficits such as poor balance and flexibility are detected, appropriate home programs are offered which may include therapeutic exercise or patient education for fall prevention. When more severe dysfunction is present, referrals are made for physical therapy consults at local clinics; wellness services such as yoga, tai chi, and aquatic exercise; or physician office visits.

Objectives of the Project

The APTV service-learning project was designed to provide practical, hands-on experience for second year DPT students while addressing the health needs of the public. A total of six objectives were listed:

1. Develop/revise a training manual that will be used by the next cohort
2. Research the concept of the Annual Physical Therapy Visit
3. Develop/revise all forms needed to implement the event
4. Market and administer the event
5. Assess your project
6. Present your project in writing and through oral presentation

Timeline and Assignments

Doctor of physical therapy students are presented with the details of the assignment in early January on the first day of class. A project manager is elected from the student population, and this individual directs the event and serves as the primary liaison between students, faculty, and clinical partners. Students then self-select into one of four task forces: Research, Forms/Tests, Procedure, and Marketing/Recruitment. Descriptions of each task force duties are outlined in Table 1. Members of each task force elect a task force chair who coordinates all activities of the group. This arrangement mirrors typical operations of public health programs, and also provides multiple leadership opportunities for students. Students are encouraged, but not required, to make improvements to the event based on student comments and reflections from previous years. Faculty oversee the process and approve changes as needed.

Evaluation

As a method to understand the impact of the service-learning project, students and clients gave feedback. The clients who participated in the event completed a satisfaction survey. The doctor of physical therapy students submitted a group written reflection of their experience of the event. The students also made recommendations for future cohorts

based on their participation. A complete training manual was required as a course assignment, including project completion details such as research related to the APTV, marketing, tests/measures, procedures, and evaluation. Students completed optional course and instructor evaluation surveys.

Table 1. Taskforce Assignments

<p>1. Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Develop background information for project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Peer-reviewed research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PT role in screens 2. Wellness/Prevention 3. The annual checkup by a PT ii. APTA/Other information related to topic iii. Relevance and future use for PT practice iv. Set objectives/goals for the project v. Impact evaluation
<p>2. Forms/Tests and Measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Finalize tests/screens needed for event b. Finalize forms c. Lead training session for performance of tests
<p>3. Procedure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Create outline of event details b. Develop layout of clinic space c. Secure needed equipment/supplies d. Process evaluation e. Coordinate/manage day of event
<p>4. Marketing/Recruitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Recruit licensed PTs to supervise students during event b. Market event to relevant population c. Create advertising materials as appropriate d. Distribute advertising materials e. Schedule clients for event f. Follow-up/reminders to assure attendance g. Minimize tardiness and no-shows h. Follow-up client satisfaction survey

RESULTS

There were three separate screenings performed: spring 2017, spring 2018, and spring 2019. A total of 95 individuals aged 50 and above from the community received free screenings. Student reflections of the event were positive. Client satisfaction was very high, and many individuals returned over multiple years. There was one adverse event consisting of a minor fall down a step with no significant injury.

Student reflections after the event provided insight into the experiential experience of community service and learning from a student perspective. Each cohort indicated enjoyment of the project and a desire to continue the project for future cohorts. One group stated, "It was a great experience for all those involved and allowed us to gain hands-on experience in the development of a health promotion event that we may each be requested to initiate in our future workplace." Student teaching evaluations rated the

instructor higher than department, college, and university averages, indicating an overall good experience with the course. Individual comments were very positive and samples are provided in Table 2.

Client satisfaction was assessed through a general written intake form. Clients were asked, "Overall, how satisfied were you with your physical therapy checkup?" Of those completing the survey (N=89), 100% selected either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" when other options were "neutral," "dissatisfied," and "very dissatisfied." Written suggestions included recommendations to improve parking and to provide a better quality map and good directions to the physical location. In 2019, the location for the event changed from previous years, which caused some confusion for those return clients.

Students were required to make recommendations for a successful APTV in the written manual to assist future cohorts. These "lessons learned" from previous groups are listed in [Table 3](#).

Table 2. *Sample Student Comments*

What were the best things about this course?

"The health promotion project was fun."

"The health promotion and screening project were the coolest parts about this. I completely enjoyed those projects and the impact we had on the community."

"I really like the health screens; it was awesome getting in the clinic to actually perform activities."

"Setting up the health screen and seeing it be a huge success."

"The semester-long project to be able to interact and help the community was much better than having to take any tests..."

"I really enjoyed the health promotion project. Not only was it beneficial for the community but also to me as a future clinician. It was nice to be put in a position where I felt like I had responsibility to educate patients while my teachers were present to provide feedback and guidance."

Table 3. *Lessons from the Annual Checkup Service Learning Project*

Pre-event Planning

Use a variety of methods to market: email blast to senior group very effective
Schedule 4 weeks out – making appointments preferred to “walk-in”
Recommend 2 clients/15 minutes based on staffing
Send a reminder email 2 weeks prior to event
Phone clients 3 days prior to event to confirm
Be proactive to avoid no shows
Importance of good, accurate map
Doing paperwork prior is helpful
Use a training session with cross training in all tests/measures (administration and interpretation)
Have a dry-run to work out kinks
Recruit physical therapists to supervise student PTs (faculty plus local clinicians)
Weekend worked better for parking and less congestion in building

Day-of-Event Coordination

Parking can be an issue
Good flow between stations is essential
Signs are needed inside and outside the facility
Provide adequate space/chairs for waiting room
Layout of stations – important to streamline process
Use 1 person to direct with a “birds eye view”
Use 2 student “floaters” to help as needed and keep clients moving
Need 2 people at check-in
Private area needed for medical history/check-in
Use cheat-sheets to quickly assess for red flags
Vital signs station needs adequate staff to prevent bottleneck
Use laminated data sheets at each station with normative values

Event

The Biodex Biosway for balance assessment was popular and clients seem to like technology
The debriefing session was most popular
Use a private room for debriefing session for HIPAA compliance
Use a 1-page summary sheet for patient/physician
Provide breaks for students
Exercise recommendations need to be written and concise

Post-Event

Have good, secure storage for medical records
Maintain contact list for future groups

DISCUSSION

This paper explored student physical therapists' perspectives on the development and implementation of a service-learning project providing annual health screenings to high-risk, underserved older adults. Overall, the student participants reported positive experiences and felt participating in the service learning was beneficial for learning "hands-on" skills of the profession including examination techniques, basic home exercise prescription, and patient education. Many students also commented on the fulfillment they experienced after being able to help members of the community, which in turn generated an increased likelihood to consider being involved in future community engagement events as a professional. This finding is consistent with previous research into physical therapy student service learning, which reported improved confidence, interest, and willingness to participate in future health promotion activities (Tapley & Patel, 2016). Allowing students to perform examination skills during their didactic training is invaluable in fostering professional growth and confidence.

Injury prevention and the promotion of health and wellness are integral components of physical therapy practice. Many students do not get adequate opportunities to develop these skills during clinical experiences; this is likely due to the nature of healthcare reimbursement focused on post-injury rehabilitation as opposed to preventative measures. The APTV assignment offers students valuable experience in performing these components of practice.

Thomas Edison stated, "the doctor of the future will give no medicine, but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in diet, and in the cause and prevention of disease." (BrainyQuote, n.d., para. 1). Embedding the knowledge and practice of the APTV within the physical therapy curriculum aligns well with this wise advice from the past. In addition, the initiative is in harmony with the current CDC recommendation to

invest in prevention-oriented care services for the improvement of mainstream medicine and public health (CDC, 2021). By addressing movement dysfunctions early, this unique, "real-world" assignment allows DPT students the opportunity to fulfill the mission of the APTA: "Transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human condition" (APTA, 2019a, para. 1).

A key component of any service-learning project is addressing needs of the community. As a result of this project, a high-risk, underserved community received health screening and advice on fall risk reduction, physical activity recommendations, and counseling on healthy behaviors. Thus far, the community participants have been satisfied with the program, and the continued feedback from community partners continues to be a key consideration in updating the APTV.

The organization and detailed structure provided in the APTV service-learning assignment may have implications for community engagement and higher education in general. It has been reported that both the level of instructor guidance provided for a service-learning project and the extent of project integration with course material may be related to student learning (Lambright & Lu, 2009). Students were provided extensive details related to the design and implementation of the APTV. In addition, the course was strategically located toward the end of the didactic curriculum, which allowed students to apply clinical knowledge and skills learned in previous coursework. The higher education community should consider providing sufficient structure in the design of service-learning projects to eliminate student confusion and promote success. The success of the APTV may also be a result of timing of student learning and sequencing of content within the curriculum. Instructors should consider appropriate integration of current and past content in the design of meaningful service-learning experiences.

Another lesson this case study provides the larger academic community is related to leadership. It has been suggested

that leadership skill development can be incorporated successfully into service-learning projects (Lester, 2015). By providing multiple opportunities for leadership within the APTV service-learning project, students were able to assume responsibility and a sense of ownership for the project. There was a project director/coordinator student position who oversaw the entire project and acted as a liaison to the supervising faculty member. In addition, multiple task force chairs were staffed by students who had the responsibility of organizing meetings and providing weekly reports. Instructors designing service-learning projects in other disciplines may benefit from incorporating multi-level leadership opportunities within a single group project.

CONCLUSION

The APTV offers unique opportunities for community engagement in physical therapy professional education. DPT students appreciate the tangible benefits of experiential learning in training for a “hands on” future professional life. When DPT students are offered a structured plan with adequate faculty supervision, both student and client satisfaction are high. High-risk, underserved older adults are the recipients of free yearly screens for strength, flexibility, endurance, balance, and gait deficits. Early detection of physical decline with aging may lead to interventions that can improve daily living activities and overall health-related quality of life. The authors believe service-learning projects can be implemented in other healthcare programs to provide a hands-on learning experience to students and benefit the community they serve. This case study provides a framework and guideline for implementation.

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